

## Assertions of identities through news production: News-making among teenagwe Muslim girls in London and New York

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# Assertions of identities through news production

## *News-making among teenage Muslim girls in London and New York*

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**ABSTRACT** British Muslim frustration with the media is well researched and documented; their main concern is how news discourses on Islam influence opinions of majority audiences. This article argues that production-based audience research methods give insight into how minority audiences see themselves in relation to the majority and how groups negotiate a sense of belonging through media discourses. The study used a technique whereby Muslim teenagers in London and New York were asked to produce a two-minute news story on the 'War on Terror' that combined images from a digital archive with an accompanying voiceover. The article analyses how the participants position themselves as representatives of a global Muslim community-in-suffering to imagined mainstream audiences in the UK and US.

**KEYWORDS** *audience research, imagined audience, Muslim identity, news, participatory methods, war in Iraq, War on Terror, youth*

## Introduction

This article reports the preliminary analysis of an experimental audience research project undertaken with young people in New York and London.<sup>1</sup> Its aim was to explore the ways in which young Muslims define their political identities through their engagement with the news media's reporting of the 'War on Terror' and the 2003 war in Iraq. It raised the following questions: how do they locate themselves in regard to national, transnational and trans-ethnic Muslim discourses and identities? How do they see themselves in relation to mainstream national audiences and negotiate questions of belonging?

Other articles in this special issue show that news of the war on Iraq and the larger 'War on Terror' have become sites for many British Muslims, young and old, to assert their understandings of citizenship and to locate



themselves within the larger Muslim *umma*. Many British Muslims have turned to alternative sources of news because they perceive mainstream reporting of the war as untrustworthy and Islamophobic. Nevertheless, most of the participants in the research presented in this special issue of *European Journal of Cultural Studies* rely on mainstream British media as their main source of news. It is apparent that their relationships with news discourses are complex and often contradictory. The research presented here aimed to probe this complex relationship by using an alternative research methodology. Instead of using traditional focus group interviews, it asked the participants to produce TV news stories using salient news images from the war in Iraq and the 'War on Terror'.

From July 2004 to March 2006, 23 video production sessions were conducted with young Muslims (13 in London and 10 in New York).<sup>2</sup> This article describes only two groups, both of young women in their late teens, one group from London and the other from New York. This of course does not enable a comprehensive discussion of young Muslims' responses to news discourses on the war. Rather, this microanalysis allows an exploration of what happens when participants are turned into news producers. By asking them to produce a TV news clip on the war as they imagine it, we move beyond the register of an interview and elicit the multiple conversations that emerge from the production process: their dialogues with the researcher, with each other and with their 'imagined audience'.

## Aims and method

### Making news

There are many reasons for seeking additional methods of audience research: the desire to generate richer talk, an alternative for those who are not comfortable in talking situations, and finding ways to enable audience members to express their relationships with the codes and norms of visual discourses (Gauntlett, 1996; Morrison and MacGregor, 1995). 'News-making' audience research methodologies are not entirely new: Greg Philo of the Glasgow Media Group used video to stimulate a 'news-writing' activity (Philo, 1990; Philo and Berry, 2004). David Morrison also used an alternative, visual research methodology in his research on television violence: participants were asked to construct a three-minute news piece using a given set of images and to write a voiceover for the sequence (Morrison and MacGregor, 1995). Philo's and Morrison's research methods explore audiences' relationships with news structures and news narratives. This study has used similar methods to elicit rich conversation from young people. It is as much interested in their conversations during production as it is in their final products.

The availability and user-friendliness of video production technologies now make videomaking a practical audience research method. Tools such

as iMovie, a home movie editing tool made by Apple computers, make simple video production so convenient that it is entirely reasonable to introduce the project and have participants make a video within a two-hour time period. The video editing program was prepared ahead of time by collecting still and moving news images from a range of sources, including BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera and recent documentaries on the war. The final productions are essentially linear collages of these images.

The participants were told that the goal of the session was to produce a short news story for a children's television news programme similar to the BBC's *Newsround*. Before introducing them to the iMovie tool, they were asked to talk about their patterns of news consumption. The discussion then moved to questions about the war: is there a war going on? Who is fighting? Why are they fighting? Does the war have a name? Do they see this as a war against Muslims? Before they began using the editing tool, the participants were asked to brainstorm images that they would include for a two-minute clip explaining this war to a younger audience. The task was deliberately made rather vague in order to see how they framed the war in Iraq in relation to the 'War on Terror'. The session then turned to the editing tool and exploring the image library, or clip bin. The only technical knowledge that the participants needed to learn was how to scroll through the images, view them, and construct a sequence in the iMovie timeline. This instruction took no more than five minutes. The group then worked together to explore and select images for their news piece. Writing the voiceover script was the most time-consuming part of the session. Once this was completed, their voiceover was recorded and the final project exported into Quicktime movies.

The final video productions were of course over-determined by the images pre-selected for the clip bin. In establishing the library, this study aimed to incorporate a range of perspectives on 9/11, the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq. It began the collection process by interviewing two adults of very different political persuasions: one was highly critical of the rhetoric of the 'War on Terror', the other sympathetic to its express goals. Each was asked to construct a video using the images provided and to suggest images that should be added to the clip bin. The collection expanded as different focus groups suggested new images. Most of the clips came from documentaries on the war – *CNN Tribute: America Remembers* (2002), *National Geographic: 21 Days to Baghdad* (2003), *Stop the War: A Film by Media Workers Against the War* (2003), an anti-war video produced by the UK Stop the War Coalition, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) – and recordings of BBC news. The relevant segments were identified, broken up into three to 10-second segments and saved in the clip bin.

For the broader research project, second-generation British and American Muslims, both male and female, aged 13–18, were recruited. Much research on British Muslims has focused on British-Asian Sunni Muslims (Abbas, 2005;



Jacobson, 1998; Kucukcan, 1999; Lewis, 2002; Poole, 2002). Working with a more diverse population, this study explores how news language serves as a resource in the construction of transnational and trans-ethnic Muslim identifications. Given the multitude of Islamic discourses from different countries and a range of sectarian beliefs, how do British and American news reports on Islamism and 'terrorism' inform these young people's understanding of Islam and politics? Do these young people of different ethnicities feel greater empathy with Iraqis and Afghans because they are Muslim? How do these diverse groups see themselves as a part of a global, transnational *umma*?

The British group discussed in this article consisted of three participants aged 17 and 18, from a working-class borough of north London. The American group consisted of two sisters, 17 and 19, from a middle-class suburb of New York City. All the girls were similarly articulate, academically oriented and considered themselves to be politically engaged. Their different relationships with Muslim, political and news discourses exemplify some of the differences observed between young Muslims in the UK and US. They also serve as a comparison between young Muslims living among ethnic majorities and in a minority area. The American girls lived in a predominantly white, middle-class community and were among a very small minority of Muslims in their town, while the British girls live in a working-class neighbourhood with a sizeable Muslim population.

### **Participants in London: Sara, Jasmine and Hanan<sup>3</sup>**

The London group were identified after their sociology teacher was contacted; the researcher met with them three times over the course of two weeks. They attend an all-girls secondary school in north London with an ethnically diverse population: most of the students are African Caribbean, African, Turkish, Somali and South Asian. Most are British nationals. The teacher selected the three Muslim participants: Jasmine (Turkish, 17), Hanan (Gujarati Indian, 18) and Sara (Yemeni, 18). All three strongly identify as Muslim, although their degree of religiosity and expressions of faith differ. Sara describes herself as the most religious in her household; she wears a headscarf and a *jilbab* (a full-length gown). Hanan wears a headscarf, although not the *jilbab*; she was less vocal in discussing her religious practice. Jasmine comes from a secular family; her discussion of religion was interwoven with her discussion of Turkish tradition and culture, which is not uncommon among Turkish Muslim youth (Kucukcan, 1999). She did not wear a headscarf; however, she expressed interest in learning to read the *Koran*. They are all active consumers of news and in the focus group they all voiced frustration over the insensitive portrayal of Muslims in the media. The girls were particularly reflective on the issues of media bias and representation; this could be attributed to their coursework in media studies and sociology.

**Participants in suburban New York: Kit and Kat**

The participants were identified through an Islamic centre in suburban New York, and the researcher met with them three times between August and December 2005. Kit (18) and Kat (16) were born in the New York area to parents of Indian origin and live in a community where there are very few Muslims and South Asians. Like the British girls, they have strong political views and are critical of representations of Muslims in the media. They did not study media in school (few American high schools offer media as an academic subject). The schools they attended were typical American schools and far less ethnically diverse than the school in London. Kit and Kat are sisters in a family of three girls. Kit has just completed her first year of university in Washington, DC; Kat is in her final year of high school. Kit's move out of a predominantly white suburb into a multi-cultural university has helped her to become more aware of identity politics. The two girls identify as Muslim, Indian and American; they come from a religious family, but in many ways they have conformed to the social norms of American ethnic majority teenagers. Neither wears a headscarf, but they consider themselves to be practising Muslims. Both have made several transatlantic trips to London throughout their lives; their mother is a British citizen and was raised in Luton. Kit, Kat and their mother were visiting relatives in Luton at the time of the London bombings of 7 July 2005.

**Transatlantic news consumption**

Kat contrasted the news consumption and general level of political knowledge of young people in Britain compared to the young people they knew and grew up with in their hometown. She observed that discussion of politics and consumption of TV news in London seemed to be greater than that in America, and that British teenagers' general knowledge of politics and current events was far greater than even that of an 'honours student' in her school.

Kat: I just notice that when we were in London, how much more everyone watches the news and listens to the radio and reads the paper. Here it's not like that. Everyone is watching cartoons, eating French fries.

Interviewer: Do you mean kids your age?

Kat: I think everyone. It was really annoying at times, because the TV was always on, no matter where we were.

In the larger research project, this difference was noticed also between London and New York. In general, the British participants were able to recall names, events and places from the recent wars better than the American participants. The same observation was made by Buckingham (2000) in his transatlantic study of news readings among young people. However, even though knowledge of facts and events was often missing from the American participants' discussion of news, they were aware of the broader



themes of news narratives and were confident in expressing their anti-war and anti-Bush opinions. This difference is apparent when comparing the two video scripts by the girls from New York and London.

Kit and Kat were less familiar with transnational media networks and alternative news sources than the British girls. For Kit and Kat, the BBC was the sole alternative to mainstream American news programmes. Jasmine, Sara and Hanan all reported that they watched transnational channels: Jasmine watched Turkish television regularly, while Sara and Hanan watched Al-Jazeera. However, despite having access to alternative media, they mostly referred to mainstream British television channels such as the BBC, Sky News and Channel 4, particularly mentioning documentaries and films that they had seen on television and in school, including Kenan Malik's *Are Muslims Hated?* (Channel 4, 2005) and Kenny Gleenan's film *Yasmin* (Channel 4, January 2005). They were very much aware of a public discourse on British Muslim identity.

### News clips

The scripts produced are given below.<sup>4</sup> The narration reads like a series of statements. This somewhat choppy, disjointed style goes unnoticed when hearing the words read over the images, which smooth over the gaps in the writing. This discrepancy is apparent in most of the videos produced for the wider research project. Writing the narration was the most challenging task for the participants: a purely visual narrative is more open, allowing for multiple readings, while words will guide the reading of the images.

### Marginalization and Muslim empathy

Kit and Kat's video was informed by their sense of difference in relation to mainstream society. Their construction of an unsympathetic, ignorant 'imagined audience' is clear in the first lines of their voiceover. As Muslims, they felt it necessary to 'teach' their audience that it is just as bad to bomb a mosque as it is to bomb a church – that is, it is just as bad to kill Muslims as it is to kill Christians. Through this sequence they are positioning themselves as more empathetic to the predominantly Muslim casualties of the war. The realities of 9/11 had resulted in a feeling of difference that they had never previously known:

September 11th ... made us realize that we're not as similar to all of our friends as we thought we were.

Like the girls in London, Kit and Kat had followed the events on TV news, but unlike them, they had classmates whose families directly suffered losses from the attacks. Along with the national security issues that 9/11 raised, Kit and Kat faced the insecurities of racism and Islamophobia. This added insecurity had not been immediately apparent to Kat, who was 13 at the time: she did not realize that phone threats made to their mother



Table 1 London group

<i>Voiceover</i>	<i>Video</i>
The event of 9/11 was the beginning of the war against terrorism,	(Moving image) The attack on the twin towers on September 11, 2001
which Bush assumed was brought about	(Still image) George W. Bush
by Osama Bin Laden,	(Still image) Osama bin Laden
as proved by his video footage.	(Moving image) Osama bin Laden from one of his videotaped messages
After the war on Afghanistan cooled off, Bush	(Moving image) George W. Bush addressing the United Nations
somehow received information on Saddam having weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.	(Moving image) Saddam Hussein before the invasion, followed by a map of Iraq
As the UN were opposed to the war on Iraq, Bush insisted on going ahead with it.	(Moving image) UN Security Council
After, the Americans and the British invaded Iraq	(Moving image) Tony Blair
by bombing several areas of Iraq and searching areas.	(Still image) Map of Iraq with an arrow pointing to Fallujah
Even though no weapons were found in most of the areas raided in Fallujah,	(Moving image) An explosion at night
the Americans were still reluctant to leave the country.	(Moving image) American soldiers kicking a door
They raided houses of politicians and captured innocent civilians and family members.	(Moving image) American soldiers 'searching' a house
The capturing of Saddam Hussein brought joy to many Iraqis especially the Shias.	(Still image) Close-up of Saddam Hussein after he was captured
In celebration, they tore down the statue of Saddam Hussein. While there was celebration on one side,	(Moving image) The tearing down of Saddam Hussein's statue
the other side was preparing for war to defend their country by any means possible.	(Moving image) Masked men carrying rocket launchers
The suffering hasn't stopped.	(Moving image) A boy running away from gunshots





Table 1 (continued)

<i>Voiceover</i>	<i>Video</i>
In the process of protecting their homeland, many have died.	(Moving image) A girl crying and covering her mouth (Moving image) Men carrying a coffin with Arabic writing on it
Many have been captured and tortured.	(Still photo-montage) Images of torture at Abu Ghraib
Some lucky ones reunite with their families.	(Still image) Older Iraqi man hugging a young boy (presumably his son)
While others mourn for their lost loved ones,	(Moving image) A woman in a black headscarf (presumably Iraqi) crying and throwing her hands in the air
Bush and Blair celebrate their victory and begin their business plans.	(Moving image) George Bush and Tony Blair walking together, dressed in casual clothes and smiling
Back in Iraq, hopelessly, some are living by the <i>Koran</i> and die by the sword,	(Still image) A man with his face covered by a <i>kaffiya</i> (Palestinian checked scarf), holding a <i>Koran</i> in one hand, a knife in the other
and some are simply putting their faith to God and pray in congregation for world peace.	(Still image) Muslim men standing in line for congregational prayer

Table 2 New York group

<i>Voiceover</i>	<i>Video</i>
What is the 'War on Terror'? You've seen things on TV and heard things from your parents. Now, let's take a closer look.	(Animated graphic) 'War on Terror'
The same way you pray in a church, Muslims pray in mosques.	(Still photo-montage) Images of stained glass windows from a church (Moving image) Muslim men in congregational prayer bending down
How safe would you feel if a bomb went off in your church?	(Moving image) Explosion in a mosque
The Middle East is only a plane ride away.	(Still image) Map of the Middle East (Moving image) A plane taking off
As we send away our soldiers, we should support them.	(Still image) Children holding American flags
But it's important to know,	(Still image) Woman in Muslim headscarf at an anti-war protest

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Voiceover	Video
everyone doesn't agree with this war.	(Moving image) Men (presumably Iraqi) standing with a sign saying 'We want to lead ourselves'
People are fighting for access to oil, the spread of democracy and the difference of religion.	(Moving image) An American soldier riding in a tank
Sometimes, those beliefs make people act very badly.	(Moving image) Bomb explosions at night
But we need to remember, there are many innocent victims.	(Still photo-montage) Images of torture at Abu Ghraib
Everyone is dealing with the loss of loved ones from war.	(Moving images) A boy running away from gunshots; Red Crescent workers carrying a stretcher
Our president says the war is over and that the mission is accomplished.	(Moving images) American soldiers sitting with their heads down; soldiers covering another soldier's body on the side of a road
How do you feel?	(Still image) George Bush under a sign that reads 'Mission Accomplished'
	(Moving image) An overhead view of an American cemetery

might have been a result of anti-Muslim sentiment. It was through her older, more politicized sister that she learned of their vulnerabilities as Muslims. Kat, who was quite popular in school, said that the anti-Muslim and anti-Arab statements made at school were more subtle. She reported hearing comments such as: 'Let's bomb the Muslims.' She said:

Anytime I said anything about it, they were like, 'Oh, sorry, we didn't know you were Muslim.' ... I just feel like people held their tongue around me because they knew they were going to hear something [from me].

These new insecurities activated a racialized narrative of 'us against them'. Kit and Kat made many references to the 'ignorance' of the people around them:

I think the biggest disconnect is between whites and non-whites. That goes above anything else. No one is going to forget what skin colour you are. Especially with, like, the Indian mentality of 'the whiter is better', and like, who are the lightest people? The white people. Who is the most powerful country? America. Who do you think of as an American? A white person. (Kat)

The term Islamophobia has not yet entered the vocabulary of anti-racist discourse in America as it has in the UK. Many participants recounted instances of anti-Muslim bias, but it was generally read as 'racist' not 'Islamophobic'. In the discussions, Kit and Kat did not accuse the media of being unfair. Instead, they attributed their felt insecurities to the ignorance



of American audiences who, due to lack of education, were unable to empathize with Muslims – especially after the 9/11 attacks.

Unlike Kit and Kat, the British participants did not refer to racism in their neighbourhood and school. But by selecting a series of images of torture, crying and funerals, they too presented themselves as more empathetic to Iraqi suffering than their imagined audience. Sara, who was the most vocal in her opinions, explained that Bush's supporters are misguided because they 'do not see what we see'. But what does Sara see that they do not see? None of the participants reported seeing the 'real' casualties of war, yet they appeared to have great empathy with its victims. Sara was particularly critical of a biased media that omits the 'truth' of the suffering Iraqis. To see the suffering of war, one needs first to see the image and second, to read it as suffering. For Sara, the problem was the omission of Iraqi victims from mainstream news coverage. She suggested, although less strongly than Kit and Kat, that pro-Bush audiences are unable to empathize with Iraqi war victims. When she was asked what images she would use to represent the war, she said:

Not necessarily the soldiers being killed or something ... other people are being victimized in this war as well as them. They don't show that to us.

### Reflections on identity politics

Kit and Kat expressed frustration with British Muslims' claims as victims of discrimination: the population of Muslims is so large in London that they have 'nothing to worry about'. When they heard that the London bombers of 7 July 2005 were allegedly Asian and Muslim, they were quite shocked.

I think it's even more surprising though because it's so much easier, I feel like, for *desi* [South Asian] Muslims in England to just be themselves than it is for American [Muslims]. Like I can understand like an American-born, *desi* Muslim feeling really out of place and doing something extreme. But I can't understand it in England when they are surrounded by their culture and acceptance, and it's okay for them to be themselves over there because there are so many more of them. That part surprised me more than anything else. Because like, they can walk around, you know with their *topees* [skullcaps] on and not be looked at differently, and here you can't. That I was mad about. (Kit)

Kit and Kat expressed a psychologized understanding of extremism consistent with the way in which teen violence is reported in American news (McManus and Dorfman, 2002). To commit an act of violence is seen as 'anarchistic' rather than political. While there are certainly psychological elements that cannot be discounted in the extreme behaviour of the London bombers, Kit and Kat do not locate this violence within a larger, *jihadi* political discourse. Their familiarity with British Islamist movements such as Al-Muhajiroun was limited to what they saw on TV while in London:

I think I did see something about that in England. Yeah, there were a bunch of kids standing out on the street, a bunch of guys wearing *topees*. They were

yelling, passing out flyers – they were really, like, passionate. They were so into what they were saying. I don't think I could hear what they were saying, 'cause the news reporter was talking over them. I remember seeing that, thinking, 'Oh, I wonder what that is', but I don't remember paying attention to it.

They can empathize with the cause of 'doing something for the *umma*', but they thought that it is wrong to 'make your statement' through violence.

It can be argued that political Islamists are to Kit and Kat what pro-war Americans are to the British girls: a group of people mediated to them only through news images. The London girls hardly live among 'radical Muslims', but prominent figures such as Abu Hamza al Masri (a jailed Muslim cleric) have a presence in their communities: Sara and Jasmine both spoke of seeing him walking around in Finsbury Park with his 'guards'. Jasmine also spoke of her brother, who began attending Abu Hamza's lectures with his friends, to the dismay of their secular parents. All three are very critical of the violence that has come to be associated with such movements, but they also recognize the multiple ways in which Islam is used in political life. Kat's Muslim politics are manifest in her support for Palestine and her critique of the war in Iraq, but not in her everyday life. As with the other girls, hers is a very secular relationship with religion: its value is in spiritual development, collectively and individually, but the involvement of Islam in the everyday (e.g. gender segregation or dress) does not interfere with her understanding of public life.

The two groups mobilized different discourses to criticize the war and their governments' policies on the 'War on Terror'. Both video narratives illustrate a genuine skepticism towards the US president and British prime minister. This is highlighted in each of their voiceovers:

While others mourn for their lost loved ones, Bush and Blair celebrate their victory and begin their business plans. (London group)

Everyone is dealing with the loss of loved ones from war. Our president says the war is over and our mission is accomplished. (New York group)

Both groups emphasized the suffering caused by the war, but the images used by the girls in London focus on the suffering of Iraqis, while Kit and Kat include an image of a grieving American soldier. This was one of the major differences between the videos produced in the US and those produced in the UK across the research project. No group expressed a pro-war position, but only a few British groups used images that expressed sympathy with soldiers. Many of the American groups represented soldiers as victims of the war. This is consistent with American anti-war discourses, which frequently draw on the suffering of Americans. It can be argued that these participants are drawing from American news discourses rather than taking a pro-military stance. In fact, Kit and Kat both expressed strong critiques of their peers who supported the war and joined the military.



Sara's assumption is that by seeing suffering Iraqis, people's relationships with the issues will change. She scripted the final lines of the voice-over, stating that the situation in Iraq has become such that Iraqis are left to fight or pray. These final lines differ from her original idea for a conclusion: at the beginning of the news-making process, she had said that she wanted to end with the Iraqi government. However, each group can only choose one ending. The process of putting the video together allowed the participants to explore the issues. Their discussions during production revealed their prior knowledge and political positions as well as their questions about the conflicts. The final voiceover has structural limitations as a written narrative and only appears to present a coherent position. Often, the participants agreed to resort to what 'sounds good' rather than what reflected their complex political positions. Nevertheless, the fact that Sara, Hanan and Jasmine's piece ended as it did is significant. Through visual language evoking the Iraqis' suffering, it seeks to provoke an ethical response to the war, as implied by the final prayer image.

Kit and Kat would agree that it is hopeless to respond with violence, but they also suggest many other ways through which an individual can 'make changes', or participate in the political process. Kit, commenting on her experience of university, said:

I think everyone [there] is political – but that's because we are in [Washington] DC. Around election time, probably half the kids had T-shirts on with who they supported. In the dorms they had election parties. In college, it's 'cool' to be informed. In high school, if I said, do you want to come over and watch the elections, they'd say, 'You're a loser, get out of here.'

Kit and Kat's appeal for change draws on the lessons of American history rather than an exclusively emotional response to mediated suffering. They recognize that 'radical' groups pose problems, but should not be banned; rather, such groups should be allowed to operate not because of the importance of their message, but out of a commitment to freedom of expression and to ensure that history will not repeat itself. When they were asked about proposals to ban certain groups, Kit replied:

I think that's the first step to suppressing people. You know, there were the Japanese internment camps. I feel that's the first step to something crazy like that. I feel when the government takes away rights, it's the first step to banning an organization. Then all of a sudden Muslims can't go to pray anymore, and you can't walk down the street in a *hijab* anymore. That really worries me.

### **Islamic symbolism**

Although all the girls had different political engagements with Islam, both groups used religious symbols in their video pieces despite the fact that this was a news clip about the war. Overall, about one-third of the participants incorporated religious symbolism into their videos. Kit and Kat's



video opens with the voiceover suggesting that the war is being waged against Muslims, yet when they were asked if they believed that there was a 'war on Islam', they replied:

Kit: I think that's an understandable statement, because Muslims feel very victimized right now, but I don't think it would be as, I don't know ... I don't think that's really the point. I don't think, you know, like, this administration really cares so much about Islam, it's just that ... okay, we have our objective, you know, that objective is like monetary and military and, you know, we have these scapegoats. Because the scapegoats have always been there, it just changes through the times.

Kat: Yeah, I don't think it's a war against Islam, I think that Islam is just conveniently a scapegoat for it. And since a lot of people don't know and just don't care, you know? Like, after September 11th there were so many people that wanted to find out what Islam was. And also at the same time, people were just, like, 'I don't care'. You know, it doesn't really matter to them. It's easy to just blame someone, a group of people ...

Kit: I think the war on Islam is just a by-product of, you know, the war.

This accounts for Kat and Kit's effort to humanize Muslims, to help their audience to empathize with their suffering. Sara, Jasmine and Hanan did not use the term 'scapegoat', but they implied that the war was driven by revenge for 9/11 and was attacking the people of Iraq and Afghanistan unfairly. They did not presume the same insensitivity on the part of their imagined audience; their audience was simply not exposed to the suffering. Both groups stated that oil was the unofficial reason for the war and the consequence or 'by-product' was that it mainly affected Muslim people. Both groups used the terms 'Iraqis' and 'Muslims' in their pieces and recognized that the war's effects are not limited to nations, but are transnational. Sara, Jasmine and Hanan illustrate this by concluding with two options: violence or prayer.

## Conclusion

All the five participants in New York and London share much of the same media with the rest of Britain and the US. The structure of the news-making task invites participants to reproduce the news as they know it and to reconfigure the dominant narratives to reflect their perceptions of the conflict. In North London, Sarah, Jasmine and Hanan saw themselves as having greater compassion for the Iraqi and Afghani victims of the war. Across the Atlantic, Kit and Kat presumed that the imagined, majority audience was unsympathetic to all Muslims, both in America and abroad. They used their video to remind their audience that Muslims are like Christians. Their question – 'How would you feel if a bomb went off in your church?' – suggests that they too are victims of the conflict.

386 However, unlike the girls in London, they did not present the suffering



as asymmetrical. The statement that 'everyone is dealing with the loss of loved ones from war' is set beside an image of an American casualty in order to universalize the suffering rather than emphasize Muslim victims. 'As we send away our soldiers, we should support them': here Kit and Kat replicated the American news narratives, thus their general critique of the war did not render them immune from reproducing mainstream discourses. Indeed, their voiceover implies support for military action, although their discussions during production suggested that they were against it. This discrepancy is not a sign of their confusion; rather, it illustrates their multiple identities.

There are many factors which may account for the differences between these groups. Certainly, being a young Muslim living among an ethnic majority in north London is not the same as being a young Muslim in suburban New York. They are exposed to varied political environments, national news cultures and Muslim discourses. The videos illustrate that each group made varying assumptions about majority audiences. However, despite differences, both groups conceived of the news-making process as an opportunity to reveal a story that had been hidden from the masses and which they had access to by virtue of their membership in the Muslim *umma*.

## Notes

1. The author wishes to thank David Buckingham and Marie Gillespie for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.
2. The videos from the research project can all be seen at [www.reproduce.blogspot.com](http://www.reproduce.blogspot.com)
3. All of the participants were asked to create pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.
4. I must emphasize that the scripts are a poor substitute for the videos, which can be accessed online at these addresses: [http://ia201114.eu.archive.org/hdd1/movies/jasminehananandsaramov/jasmine\\_hanan\\_and\\_sara.mov](http://ia201114.eu.archive.org/hdd1/movies/jasminehananandsaramov/jasmine_hanan_and_sara.mov) and [http://ia300132.us.archive.org/1/items/kit\\_kats\\_news\\_piece\\_II/kit\\_kat2.mov](http://ia300132.us.archive.org/1/items/kit_kats_news_piece_II/kit_kat2.mov)

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### **Biographical note**

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